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WORLD | MIDDLE EAST

Iran Poised to Gain as ISIS Falls in Mosul

Iraq declares victory in the country's second-largest city, as Tehran seeks to extend influence



Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, center, declared the liberation of Mosul from Islamic State on Monday.

PHOTO: EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY

By Maria Abi-Habib in Baghdad and Asa Fitch in Mosul, Iraq

July 10, 2017

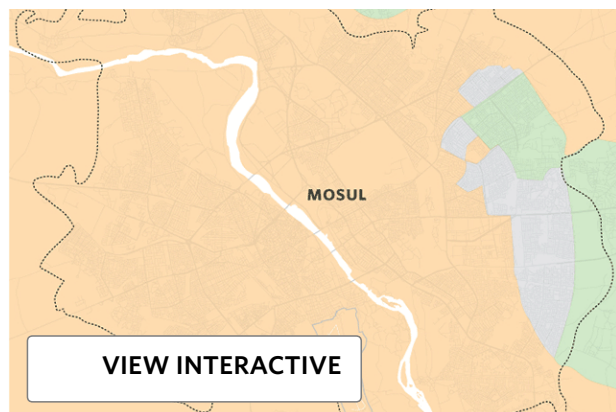
Iraq's U.S.-backed prime minister declared victory over Islamic State in Mosul on Monday, but Iran is shaping up to be one of the biggest winners in the struggle with Washington for influence in Baghdad and across the region.

Nouri al-Maliki, a former Iraqi prime minister supported by Iran, is campaigning to win back his old job in next year's Iraqi election against Haider al-Abadi, the incumbent favored by Washington.

Mr. Maliki has given much of the credit for the Mosul victory to an umbrella group of mostly Shiite militias, many supported by Iran, that he formed in 2014,

just before his ouster as premier. The election could determine whether the country tilts toward Iran or the U.S.

How Islamic State Lost Mosul



Islamic State's losses in Mosul also are expected to make it easier for Shiite-majority Iran to ship weapons through northern Iraq and neighboring Syria to the Hezbollah militia Iran supports in Lebanon. Authorities in Tehran have been quick to hail the battle against the Sunni extremists in Mosul as

a triumph for them and their regional allies.

"Today the resistance highway starts in Tehran and passes through Mosul and Beirut to the Mediterranean," Ali Akbar Velayati, a top adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader, said last week as he welcomed Islamic State's defeat in Mosul.

On Monday, Mr. Abadi declared victory over Islamic State in Mosul, formally ending a nearly nine-month battle to win back Iraq's second-largest city, which the extremists captured three years ago.

Mr. Abadi said Iraq still had to restore stability and eliminate sleeper cells, and the commander of the U.S.-led coalition fighting Islamic State, Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend, pointed to tough battles ahead to eliminate Islamic State.

For Iran and Hezbollah, Islamic State's rise to power in 2014 became one of the biggest challenges to the alliance's regional influence, erecting a state along the Iraqi-Syrian border that broke the weapons pipeline from Tehran to Beirut and challenged Tehran's allies in Damascus. Iran has also shipped weapons to Hezbollah by using Iraqi airspace to fly equipment into Damascus, a less efficient route, according to Western and U.S. officials.

Now Islamic State's empire has been reduced to patchy zones of control, allowing Iran to slowly regain its arc of influence stretching from Tehran

through Baghdad to Damascus and Beirut.

Tehran has longstanding cultural and political ties with Iraq, the largest Arab country with a Shiite majority.

Although U.S. forces and the Shiite militias maintain an uneasy truce in Iraq, the militias have sought to check U.S. forces across the border in Syria, advancing on an American special forces base in the south. Washington responded by launching airstrikes on the Iraqi militias, turning southern Syria into a flashpoint for American confrontation with Iran in the Mideast.

On Monday, Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, welcomed the victory in Mosul and taunted the U.S. for its waxing and waning support for Baghdad over the years.

"The Islamic Republic [of Iran] wasn't like other countries that closed weapon contracts with Iraq after receiving Iraq's money but refused to give support to Iraq when it's urgent," Gen. Soleimani said.

Mr. Maliki—a favorite of Iran—was blamed just a few years ago by the U.S. for stoking sectarian tensions that led to the rise of Islamic State in 2014. Washington supported Mr. Abadi to succeed him, and Mr. Maliki was pushed out of office that September.

Now Mr. Maliki is emerging as Mr. Abadi's biggest competitor in what is expected to be a tight race that could determine whether the U.S.-backed fight against Islamic State translates into lasting American influence in the country. Iran officially backs Mr. Abadi, but the relationship could fray once a figure who can unite Iraqi security forces against Islamic State is less crucial. Mr. Abadi has been more resistant to Iranian influence than other Shiite leaders, wary of being cast as an Iranian puppet.

On Sunday, with Mosul's last battles still raging, Mr. Abadi flew to the city to declare victory. But Mr. Maliki had already issued a congratulatory statement last week.

Instead of congratulating Mr. Abadi's government, Mr. Maliki praised Iraqi security forces and the Hashed al-Shaabi, or Popular Mobilization Forces, the umbrella group of mostly Shiite militias that Mr. Maliki formed in 2014. Iran trained many of those militias a decade ago to fight U.S. troops after the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Earlier this year, Mr. Maliki boasted that it was he who unified the Shiite militias and deserved the credit for Islamic State's defeats.

"Had there been no Hashed al-Shaabi, Baghdad would have fallen to terrorists," he said.

The heated jockeying for power between Iran and the U.S. in Iraq comes as the government in neighboring Syria, bolstered by Iran and Hezbollah, is on the verge of victory after more than six years of war. That would strengthen the Shiite alliance that runs from Iran to Syria and Lebanon, incorporating the powerful militias in Iraq.

In Iraq, Iran's biggest military and social tool is the Shiite militias, which have outlasted various governments in Baghdad and had numerous past confrontations with the U.S. military.

But Mr. Abadi sidelined them in the battle for Mosul, which was instead spearheaded by the country's military and police with help from U.S. special forces. This was done out of concern that a bigger role for the militias would only deepen sectarian strains, as Mosul is a predominantly Sunni city. But in many of the other battles across Iraq, the militias have been instrumental to defeating Islamic State.

"Iran is being very clever with the way it deals with Iraq," said Hisham al-Hashemi, an Iraqi researcher who often advises the Iraqi government.

"After Islamic State, Iran doesn't need to boost its influence here anymore, it'll be back to full control. The presence of Islamic State for three years in Iraq has limited the influence of Iran's allies."

Corrections & Amplifications

Tehran has longstanding cultural and political ties with Iraq, the largest Arab country with a Shiite majority. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that Iraq is the only Arab country with a Shiite majority. (July 11, 2017)

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